

Review

Source: *American Humor*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 1983), pp. 26-27

Published by: American Humor Studies Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42591239>

Accessed: 27-06-2016 08:39 UTC

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Interest in this edition of the manuscript of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn will not be limited to collectors, though the price and collector-oriented presentation makes the set something other than a working copy. Louis Budd argues in his introduction that Twain scholars and literary scholars generally will find the books useful: "close study of the holograph should not start or end with mere piety," and "the manuscript will continue to attract admirers who want to comprehend not only the heart of the matter but the early stages, the abandoned trails and the recirclings after Mark Twain completed the most acclaimed of American books." I have never been persuaded that manuscript scrutiny, edition-collation and such scholarship pays off in proportion to the amount of time and effort they demand. Surely interesting tidbits emerge, but whether or not the manuscript, eg. this one at hand, will really tell us anything significant about the masterpiece remains to be seen. But the set is inspiring emotionally. Twain was not only a great writer and our most important humorist, he is a mythic, heroic figure in our intellectual culture. Looking at his script is inspiring, not of piety but of joy, of pleasure. The script makes us feel not closer to the text but to the author. And that is exciting. Whether or not one wants to study this manuscript, reading it, or at least leafing through it is a meaningful experience.

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The Beats. Edited by Ann Charters, University of Connecticut. (Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 16). About 750 pages in 2 volumes. Bibliographies. Cumulative Index to Volumes 1-16. A Bruccoli Clark Book. Published by Gale Research Co., Detroit, 1983. CIP: L.C. Card No. 82-24257. ISBN 0-8103-1143-8. \$148.00/set. (Ready April 1983)

I always thought that the Beat phenomenon was very funny, when I was living in its fringes. Sometimes it was consciously funny in poetry, song lyrics, "new wave" comedy routines (Bruce, Buckley, improvisational theater and such) and other times it was funny in its absurdities, ironic earnestness, drug-distorted pseudo-profundities and combination of fun-seeking and distanced "cool." But most critics and commentators mention the humor in passing and move along to heavier matters. Because this DLB volume is so marvelously inclusive, a lot is said about humor and the Beat generation, despite the dominance of more serious history and evaluation. Beat poets whose work included wit, whimsy, satire, and playfulness are duly noted, eg. Bob Kaufman's "The radio is teaching my goldfish jujitsu/my old lady has taken up skin diving and sleeps underwater/I am hanging out with drunken linguists who can speak butterfly/and represent the caterpillar industry down in Washington, D.C." Peripheral figures such as Bob Dylan are given too much attention (Beat was over in NY when Dylan showed up), but comedians such as Lenny Bruce and Lord Buckley are mentioned only in pieces on others. Oh well, someone ought to write a book, or at least a nice long article, on humor and the Beat phenomenon, and this set will be indispensable for that research.

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Neil Schmitz. Of Huck and Alice: Humorous Writing in American Literature. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

This is a difficult book to read and to review. Schmitz's stylistic analysis is often so complex that it seems to demand that the reader be a specialist,

a linguist or at least someone very comfortable with modern literary theory and method. Yet he writes of the familiar. He takes on humor theory and those of us who have kept up with that rain-forest can follow Schmitz's contribution without much difficulty. Some of the things he has to say about humor, in Chapter I, are very nice, very elegant. His emphasis on style, perspective allows him to recognize incongruity of manner, attitude as well as of content, and his point that humor is an alternative system of expression, understanding is useful for a discussion of how humor works. He turns his attention, then, to Mark Twain, to Krazy Kat, to "Big Bear of Arkansas," and to Gertrude Stein (and a few others as well), and the troubles begin, at least for this reviewer. Sometimes the observations seem to ring true, to make sense, but they are long, complex ways of stating what has been said before, indeed what are common critical attitudes. Other times the commentary seems not to be making much of a point at all (eg. for Krazy Kat), or to be an intellectual jigsaw puzzle, a critical calisthenics. The earnestness of the explication suggests an importance, so we read carefully, closely, but perhaps we come away perplexed more than satisfied that we have learned anything meaningful about the authors, about American humor. But many of the critical statements in this book are so provocative, so contentious, so full of potential significance that it may deserve, demand another reading. Perhaps this is a book that warrants a longer, more careful essay-review from someone with the critical skills and literary expertise to do it justice. Your editor would welcome such a contribution.

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Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed. From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Jewish-American Stage and Screen. Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press, 1983. \$22.50.

Not all Jewish American popular performers were comedians, but enough of them used humor to make this book of very special interest to the readers of this newsletter. Once again Sarah Blacher Cohen has put together a major collection of essays. Some are better than others. Theater history can be pretty boring unless interesting questions connecting performance with motive and function are raised. Psychoanalytic criticism, e.g. Anthony Lewis's attention to neurosis and paranoia as part of the standup comedian's personality, can over-simplify, neglect the role of audience-needs and artistic tradition. Single author studies such as those on Odets, Hellman, Rice and a few others work only when the subjects are still (if ever) deserving of such close attention. The Jewishness of many of these artist's work (not of the artists so much) is doubtful, and the critics acknowledge this but then plunge on as though having said it puts it to rest and allows one to insist upon a vague, abstract connection anyway. Jewish "blood" will somehow show up somewhere sooner or later, they imply. But many of the writers here do establish the connection and in doing so they illuminate both the artists and the ethnic history. Leslie Fields on Chayevsky, Dan Walden, Stephen Whitfield, Sanford Pinsker and Alan Spiegel provide noteworthy contributions. Mark Schechner on Woody Allen will be the most controversial, most widely discussed essay in the volume. Allen is often panned by newspaper critics for not being funny enough, but his intellectual fans are usually uncritical, adoring of his insights, philosophic perspective. Schechner takes Allen's work apart and exposes its shallowness, its pretention, its moral selfishness and tightness. This piece could completely open up the discussion of Woody Allen as comic spokesman for the urban neurotic. There are several constituencies for this book; humorologists may apply.

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